

12 Oct 1970

Approved For Release 2004/07/08 : CIA-RDP80R01720R001100040021-9

The CIA in China

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HOUEI SAI, Laos (LNS) -- This sleepy Mekong River town is as close as a journalist with any regard for his safety can get to a secret CIA outpost which is the staging area for armed reconnaissance teams being sent by the U.S. into China.

Sources close to the CIA pinpoint the staging area at a small mountain valley airstrip called Nam Lieu (Nam Yu) fifteen minutes flying time north of Houei Sai. According to the same highly reliable sources, "there is always a team in China."

The teams are armed with American small arms, a special three pound radio with a range of four hundred miles, and other special equipment. Their missions are to tap Chinese telegraph lines, watch roads and do other types of intelligence gathering. Teams have gone as far as two hundred miles into China.

Each team is said to consist of about fifteen men, most of who are Yao hill tribesman. Yao are used because this tribe lives in large numbers along the mountainous frontiers of Laos, Burma, Thailand and China. There are approximately two million Yao living inside China, and some of the mercenaries have family connections there. Meo and Lao Theung tribesmen are also used for similar reasons.

The teams are normally flown to a sod airstrip known as "Site 93" of "Moung Moune," about twenty kilometers north of Nam Lieu, near the Mekong River where it forms a border with Burma. Sometimes they are put down right on the banks of Mekong by helicopters. They carry instantly inflatable rubber rafts to use crossing the Mekong into Burma. From Burma they continue northwest, entering China about fifty kilometers from Site 93.

The teams from Nam Lieu are gone three to four months, maintaining contact by radio with Nam Lieu and with airplanes which fly close to the China border in order to pick up their broadcasts.

On at least one occasion an airplane has been almost shot down for straying into China. During July 1968, an Air America "porter" single-engined plane with two aboard crossed the Chinese frontier near the tri-borders of Burma, Laos and China. Parts of both wings were blown away by anti-aircraft fire, but the plane was able to limp back to base.

Several of the teams inserted into China

have been captured, and some have switched allegiance, returning to Nam Lieu as counter-spies.

There has been at least one occasion when a returning team brought Chinese back with them. During 1968, five local Chinese functionaries ousted from their posts by the Cultural Revolution in China defected to a Nam Lieu reconnaissance team. They were brought back to Nam Lieu by the team. There they were well-treated by the Americans for a time but eventually turned over to the Royal Laotian government. According to sources close to the CIA the five were thrown into the Laotian equivalent of a "tiger's cage" -- a twelve-by-twelve-by-twelve foot pit exposed to the elements and without sanitation facilities -- and eventually executed.

Like most CIA operations in Laos, the one at Nam Lieu is directed from a super-secret headquarters at Udorn airbase in Northeast Thailand. There are four Americans in Nam Lieu, however, headed by a veteran clandestine mercenary organizer named Anthony Poe. In addition to activities inside China, Poe and his team also work with hill tribesman in the area, organizing "SGU" (special guerilla units) and Thai Army which they direct at Xieng Lom south of Houei Sai on the Lao-Thai border.

Poe is an ex-Marine non-commissioned officer, wounded in landing at Iwo Jima, who remained in Asia after World War II. In the fifties he helped organize Tibetan CIA-aided insurgents, escorted them to Colorado for training and finally went back with them into Tibet. Later he worked in the Thai-Cambodian border area with the "Khmer Blue" anti-Sihanouk forces receiving assistance from the CIA, and in other parts of Thailand with other mercenary groups for a total of five years. He has been in and out of Laos since before the Geneva Accords of 1962, and was one of the first Americans involved in arming and training hill tribe paramilitary groups in Laos.

There are reasons to believe Poe's operations at Nam Lieu are just the tip of an iceberg of U.S. activities in China and Burma. Take for example:

--Sources close to the CIA report that the CIA is working with Shan mercenary groups moving into China from northern Burma. Ac-

cording to the same sources, the Burmese government is getting assistance from the CIA mounting air-strikes on anti-government insurgent groups in the same area. This second operation is centered at Mandalay.

--Burmese border officials at the Thai-Burma border northwest of here claim there is permanent CIA "intelligence gathering activity" going on in Burma near the Chinese and Lao borders. "White Chinese" guerrillas (remnants of Chiang Kai Shek's army forced out of China by the communist revolution) numbering 2,000 men armed with American M-1, M-2, and M-16 rifles are also said by the Burmese to be active in the same area (Chinese Communist troops are also reported by the Burmese to be in the area.

--Nung people originally from the mountains of the North Vietnamese and Chinese borders now living north of Saigon near the provincial town of Xuan Loc in South Vietnam, report some of their men have been recruited at high salaries to work in CIA-run mercenary bands on the North Vietnamese and Chinese frontiers. The Nungs are given 500,000 piasters (about U.S. \$1500 at the free market rate of exchange) before they leave and another 500,000 if and when they come back six months later.

The people of Houei Sai know much more than they let on. Long a center of the opium trade, it has learned to hear no evil, see no evil, and speak no evil. Everyone from the bearded IVS (International Voluntary Services) volunteer and the USAID refugee officer to the village restaurateur are part of the "team." Nobody here talks about Nam Lieu. Expressions of fear indicate the name of Tony Poe is taboo. It is not hard to understand why.